

“ATTITUDES VERSUS ACTIONS”: LAPIERE’S (1934) CLASSIC STUDY REVISITED*

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LaPiere’s (1934) seminal research into the attitude-behavior relationship has been commonly misinterpreted as pointing out a discrepancy between attitudes and behavior. In fact, the actual discrepancy uncovered was between true attitudes — the tendency to act in a certain way — and that which is measured by an attitude questionnaire. LaPiere’s primary concern was to point out the danger of assuming that questionnaire-assessed “attitudes” lead to actual behavior in specific situations. The present paper theoretically and methodologically critiques LaPiere’s classic study.

Richard T. LaPiere’s (1899-1986) recent death gives us pause to review his considerable contributions to the behavioral sciences. Of LaPiere’s many influential publications, the most-cited is a 1934 *Social Forces* article, “Attitudes Versus Actions.” Long since tagged a “classic” (e.g., Sears, Freedman, & Peplau, 1983), it reported the first empirical investigation of the so-called “attitude-behavior” relationship (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In so doing, it spawned a line of research that still continues today (for a recent review, see McGuire, 1985).

The present paper theoretically and methodologically critiques LaPiere’s 1934 study. LaPiere’s interpretation of the study’s results, as well as that of selected succeeding scholars is examined, and several general conclusions about contribution of the study to current attitude-behavior research are offered.

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LaPiere's initial interest in the relationship between attitudes and behavior was sparked by his earlier research into the relationship between symbolic (speech) and non-symbolic (action) behavior. From this research, LaPiere (1928) concluded that there is no "necessary" association between what people say they will do and how they actually behave in a specific situation. LaPiere (1932) noted, however, "to prove that there is no *necessary* relationship does not prove that such a relationship may not exist" (p. 231). His curiosity about his relationship provided the impetus for his classic study.

LaPiere ingeniously reasoned that corroborating evidence for such a relationship could be found in the admission policies of hotel proprietors. He contended that the admission or non-admission of "colored" peoples to hotels could be used as an accurate index of racial prejudice. This contention was based on LaPiere's belief that hotel proprietors' economic dependence on their majority patrons would force them to reflect majority attitudes toward minorities, regardless of the proprietors' personal feelings toward minority groups.

For two years, beginning in 1930, LaPiere traveled the United States extensively by automobile with an obviously foreign-born Chinese couple. This was in a period during which there was much anti-Chinese sentiment across the country. Nevertheless, to LaPiere's surprise, the threesome encountered very little difficulty in procuring hotel accommodations. Indeed, they were refused at only one of the 66 hotels, auto camps, and "Tourist Homes" at which they sought lodging. Additionally, they were served without incident in 184 restaurants and cafes.

The threesome had stayed at a particular hotel on one leg of their trip, and in passing through the same area two months later, LaPiere phoned the hotel for reservations. In doing so, he asked if it would accommodate "an important Chinese gentleman." The response was an "unequivocal 'No.'" This piqued LaPiere's curiosity and led to his classic study.

THE STUDY

To compare questionnaire-assessed attitudes and specific actions, LaPiere waited six months and then "questionnaired" by mail the 251 hotels and restaurants the threesome patronized during their two year trip. He reasoned that six months would allow enough time for the actual experience (adverse or otherwise) with the Chinese couple to fade. The questionnaires all asked the identical question, "Will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests in your establishment?" Two forms of questionnaire were used. In one, the focal question was asked *alone*. In the other, the question appeared with similar queries concerning other nationalities (Armenians, Germans, Negroes, Italians, etc.).

In total, 128 completed replies were received from 81 restaurants and cafes and 47 hotels, auto camps, and "Tourist Homes." In response to the pertinent question, 92 percent of the former and 91 percent of the latter responded "No." With one exception (the only "Yes"), the remainder answered "Uncertain; depend upon circumstances." To control for the actual exposure of the respondents to the Chinese couple, LaPiere also secured questionnaire responses from an additional 32 hotels and 96 restaurants located in the same regions the threesome had visited. As before, both questionnaire forms were used. Again, over 92 percent of the respondents replied, "No." From this, LaPiere concluded that neither the questionnaire form nor previous experience with the Chinese couple influenced the respondents' replies.

LAPIERE'S INTERPRETATION

The purpose of LaPiere's study was to explore the relationship between a questionnaire-assessed attitude and overt behavior (i.e., action). LaPiere (1934) interpreted his results to show that "it is impossible to make direct comparison between the reactions secured through questionnaires and from actual experience" (p. 234). While LaPiere's questionnaire data indicated that it would be "foolhardy" for a Chinese to travel the United States, actual experience showed otherwise.

LaPiere concluded that while conventional "attitude" questionnaires may have value in reflecting a symbolic social and political orientation, they are of doubtful value in measuring actual attitudes which connote an actual pattern of *behavior*. Thus, a questionnaire may reveal what respondents "imagine" their actions will be, but not necessarily how they will react in an actual situation. For LaPiere, this discrepancy struck at the real danger of using questionnaires to measure attitudes. That danger is the tendency for investigators to use questionnaires because they are inexpensive, easy, and mechanical, and then to conclude that they have actually measured behavior that will become operative under specific circumstances.

THEORETICAL CRITIQUE

As straightforward as LaPiere's results may seem, their interpretation is fraught with controversy. As defined by LaPiere (1934), an attitude is "a behavior pattern, anticipatory set or tendency, predisposition to specific adjustment to designated social situations, or, more simply, a conditioned response to social stimuli" (p. 230). This definition is in keeping with the longstanding social psychology perspective which includes a person's behavior as a major component of his/her attitudes (e.g., Breckler, 1984; Smith, 1947). If this definition is accepted, then the assertion by later investigators that LaPiere's results demonstrate

a discrepancy between attitudes and behavior is inaccurate (e.g., Dornbusch, 1987). This interpretation would only be true if "an attitude" is defined as that which is measured by an attitude questionnaire and is not assumed to lead to actual behavior in specific circumstances.

LaPiere took the position that behavior is a direct attitude manifestation. He thus used actual behavior in a specific social situation to infer an individual's "true" attitude. Consequently, he viewed the almost 100 percent acceptance of his two travelling companions as evidence of the "true" American attitude toward Chinese. At the same time, he viewed his questionnaire results as spurious. The discrepancy he uncovered was therefore not between attitude and behavior, but between "true" attitude (the tendency to act) and attitude as measured by a conventional attitude questionnaire.

This confusion in interpreting LaPiere's results has prompted a spirited debate over the true relationship between questionnaire-assessed attitudes and behavior. Wicker (1969), for example, in reviewing 31 studies testing for consistency between attitudes and behavior in such areas as race relations, job satisfaction, and job performance, found little evidence to support such a relationship. In contrast, Schuman and Johnson (1976), in summarizing more recent reviews, concluded that most attitude-behavior studies yield results which suggest that important causal forces are involved.

Consistent with the second interpretation above, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) parenthetically note that LaPiere did not measure attitude, but rather what may be termed "behavioral intentions." Thus, they conclude that LaPiere did not actually test the attitude-behavior relationship.

In a more recent interpretation, Stephan (1985) suggests that LaPiere's results might be explained by a cost/reward model of behavior. He notes the relatively low cost associated with expressing prejudiced attitudes via mail and, perhaps, averting an undesirable future situation, as opposed to expressing these same attitudes in person. In the latter case, one would have to deal with the potential negative reactions of the outgroup members (i.e., the Chinese couple) and likely call unwanted attention to one's own behavior. Thus, Stephan believes that the high cost of expressing a prejudiced attitude in person may account for the lack of correlation between questionnaire responses and behavior in LaPiere's study.

THREATS TO INTERNAL VALIDITY

History. LaPiere waited six months before "questionnairing" the 251 hotels and restaurants he and his Chinese companions visited during their two year-trip. His intention was to allow enough time for the respondents' previous experience with the Chinese couple to fade so as not to influence their replies. Through the use of a control group, LaPiere was able to conclude that previous experience had little bearing

on his results. Still, other potential history confounds were present.

It has been repeatedly demonstrated that the consistency between behavior and attitudes is at a maximum when both variables are measured coterminously, since attitudes often change over time (e.g., Kelly & Mirer, 1974). Thus, if one accepts the concept of measuring attitudes by the questionnaire technique, then the six-month time lapse alone would plausibly lessen the consistency between respondent attitude and behavior, and thus, at least partially account for LaPiere's results. Ajzen et al. (1970) further note that LaPiere had no way to determine if the same person who waited on the Chinese couple also responded to the questionnaire. This would particularly be a problem in larger establishments and in instances where personnel may have changed during the six months between the behavioral observations and questionnaire mailing.

Instrumentation. LaPiere apparently based his results on single-item attitudinal and behavioral measures of unknown reliability. No test-retest reliabilities were reported. Repeated observations of respondent behavior while varying the target (i.e., the Chinese couple) and the use of a multiple-act criterion measure would have provided for increased reliability (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Schuman & Johnson, 1976).

In this connection, Campbell (1963) has argued that LaPiere's notion of attitude-behavior consistency is much too broad. He contends that LaPiere's study contains at least three levels of attitude intensity toward the Chinese couple: (a) *most favorable*, in which the couple is accepted both symbolically (via questionnaire) and in person, (b) *mixed*, in which the couple is accepted in person but not symbolically and (c) *least favorable*, in which the couple is neither accepted symbolically nor in person. Campbell sees a need to specify situational thresholds empirically, and concludes that all LaPiere's data show is that in the early 1930s discriminating against a Chinese couple by questionnaire response had a much lower threshold than discriminating against a Chinese couple in person. (Note the similarity to Stephan's (1985) cost/reward interpretation.)

Along this same line, it has been further suggested that the questionnaire item LaPiere used was so ambiguous and incomplete that it constituted a very different stimulus from the actual Chinese couple. Ajzen et al. (1970) make this point by noting that a different result may have been found if instead of asking "Will you accept members of the Chinese race as guests in your establishment?" LaPiere had asked "Would you accept a young, well-dressed, well-spoken, pleasant, self-confident, well-to-do Chinese couple accompanied by a mature, well-dressed, well-spoken . . . educated European (*sic*) gentleman as guests in your establishments?" (p. 270).

And finally, a confound has been noted by Wicker (1969). He advises

that if LaPiere's primary interest was the prediction of overt behavior from attitudes, it would have been better to measure verbal responses before behavioral responses, rather than after. Doing so would avoid the danger of the behavioral responses contaminating the verbal responses.

Selection. LaPiere's study has also been criticized on the grounds of selection bias. That is, the respondents to LaPiere's questionnaire were not randomly chosen, but self-selected themselves into the study (Deutscher, 1969). It is true that LaPiere's questionnaire did have a 49 percent refusal rate. Nevertheless, a 51 percent response on a mail questionnaire is "fairly" good (Ajzen et al., 1970). More importantly, however, this criticism seems to overlook the fact that LaPiere's use of a matched questionnaire control group greatly reduced the probability that selection was a serious confound.

EXTERNAL THREATS TO VALIDITY

Reactive Effects. LaPiere's use of a matched questionnaire control group effectively obviated the possibility that the Chinese couple's admission to particular establishments influenced subsequent questionnaire responses. The absence of significant differences in the control and experimental group questionnaire replies increases the confidence that can be placed in the generalizability of LaPiere's findings.

Subjects. It is widely held that investigators should use subjects from the larger group of people to whom they wish to generalize their findings. In this regard, LaPiere's use of observations drawn from a homogenous occupational pool (i.e., hotel/restaurant personnel) is an admitted limitation to the generalizability of his results. In LaPiere's defense, however, it is arguably unfair to expect one study to establish the unrestricted applicability of a finding. This normally requires that a study be replicated a number of times with different types of people in varying situations. In further defense, LaPiere's study has been both replicated and extended innumerable times over the ensuing 50-plus years.

Experimenter Bias. An important issue is the possible biasing effect that LaPiere's presence may have had on the behavior of the hotel and restaurant personnel (Linn, 1965). Although LaPiere stated that he made a conscious attempt to control for this bias by remaining outside the situation when the Chinese couple were negotiating for accommodations or entering a restaurant, Ajzen et al. (1975) note that he was present on 86 percent of such occasions and that different results may have been obtained had he remained out of the situation more. In this regard, it should be noted that LaPiere reported his data accordingly so as not to misrepresent his results, and very importantly, the couple was served on each of the 38 occasions that LaPiere was absent.

EVALUATION

Irrespective of the various criticisms voiced, the power of LaPiere's study lies in the fact that he directly observed and recorded social interactions that were part of his subjects' real lives. Arguing that direct behavioral observation is ultimate evidence of validity, Deutscher (1969) contends that "the visible weight of [LaPiere's] evidence is so great and so obvious that neither statistical approximations nor probability estimates are required to interpret the results" (p. 39).

LaPiere's purpose in conducting the study was to highlight the danger of equating questionnaire-measured symbolic attitudes (as gauged by a questionnaire) with real-life responses to specific social situations. His effort marked the beginning of an important continuing body of psychological inquiry; perhaps his greatest contribution. Also, one must admire a man who can turn his business trips into classic psychological research.

When viewed *in toto*, the criticisms of "Attitudes vs. Actions" pale next to the contributions flowing from the stream of research it has inspired. As for the soundness of LaPiere's study itself, Schuman and Johnson (1976) state the case well: "The essentially zero agreement between [questionnaire-measured] attitude . . . and action in LaPiere's study makes even important criticisms of its method appear somewhat inadequate to explain the results" (p. 165).

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